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STRANGE FIRE OF SCHISM

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The
'Strange Fire'
of Schism . .

SERMON

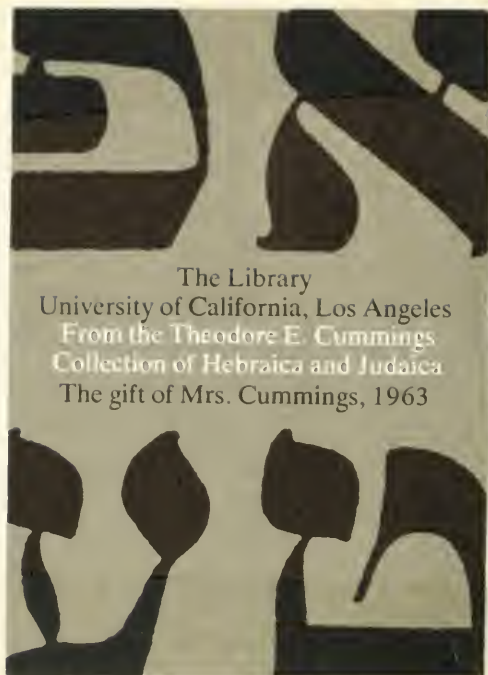
Delivered at the Lauderdale Road
Sephardic Synagogue

. . BY . .

THE CHIEF RABBI.

APRIL 26, 1914—5674.

"And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire thereon and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord."—Leviticus x., 1-2.



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THE "STRANGE FIRE" OF SCHISM.

8-24-28
"And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire thereon, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. —(Leviticus x. 1-2.) When the day of this dire tragedy opened it promised to be the proudest and happiest of Aaron's life. As he, the High Priest, was moving about in his magnificent robes and performing the solemn duties of his exalted office at the dedication of the newly-finished Tabernacle, the foremost man of 600,000, how he must have been envied! Yet the sun that had risen so proudly for him was soon to be darkened. In the midst of the celebration, at its climax in fact, horror suddenly seized all—for Aaron's sons were lying dead at his feet. They had offered forbidden fire before the Lord, and swift and signal was their punishment. "There came forth fire from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." Mysteriously—the Rabbi explains—only their souls were consumed; their bodies remained intact. **שְׂרִיפַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְגוֹן קַיִם**. Of old, the death of the sons of Aaron was a favorite text of preachers to point the moral of the mutation of fortune: But not of to-morrow, not even of the morning, for thou knowest not what the same day may bring forth. Instead of pursuing this theme, however, let us rather ask the question how these young men, the eldest sons of the High Priest, near kinsmen of the Lawgiver, could have been guilty of such an act of

IRREVERENCE AND FOLLY

as that of introducing strange fire into the sanctuary. Again, what must have been the motives behind this rash crime that such a terrible fate should have befallen them? From among the reasons assigned by Tradition for this catastrophe, we shall select some that are of special significance. The offering of strange fire, the Rabbi says, was but a consequence of an even greater desecration on the part of Nadab and Abihu. They had dared enter the sanctuary in a state of intoxication. **וְנִכְסוּ לַמִּקְדָּשׁ**. For does not Scripture immediately after the tragedy proceed with the command to Aaron: "Drink neither wine nor strong drink when ye go into the Tabernacle, lest ye die." A careful reading of the text, they tell us, will disclose a second reason. They consumed neither Moses nor Aaron; they did not even consult each other in taking the step they did. *Each* of them took *his* censer and *altered* strange fire on the altar of the Lord. Apart from all else, then, not was a deliberate disregard of their elders in office. And lastly, we are told it was even more: pride and unfilial jealousy filled their breasts.

*Sermon delivered on Sabbath last at the Lauder Tiv. Road Synagogue, Jerusalem.

"When will these old men die? How long must we wait to lead the congregation?" they asked themselves. It was this impious ambition seething in their breasts which led them to commit their unhallowed deed, which called down that terrible retribution upon them. אמר לו נרב לאביהו עוד שני זקנים הללו מתים ואנו ננהיג את הקהל אמר הכב ה נראה מי קובר את מי. Now, the story of Nadab and Abihu as expounded by our Rabbis is typical of many a movement in the Jewish religious life of the past, and illuminative of much religious unrest at the present day. At various periods in the past men have arisen who separated themselves from the congregation, who insisted on

OFFERING STRANGE FIRE

in Israel's sanctuary. More often than we are aware, have sects and schisms been rampant in Jewry. Even the prophets inveighed for centuries, early and late, against the *bamoth*, the private altars on the high places where, in defiance of the Divine Law and in disregard of the central sanctuary at Jerusalem, each man served God in his own fashion. In the days of the Sages we have the Hellenists, the Sadducees, the Essenes. After the close of the Talmud, we meet the Karaites. And later, in the Middle Ages, we encounter the Kabbalists, down to the Sabbatians and the Chassidim of modern times, and the Radical of our own day. Certain fundamental similarities are common to all these sects alike. Foremost among these similarities is the fact that their founders are all of them in a greater or lesser degree disciples in spirit of Nadab and Abihu. Thus, for example, it was the pride, ambition, and jealousy of one powerful individual that were responsible, in the eighth century, for the founding of Karaism. Anan, having failed to secure the office of Exilarch, then the highest position within the gift of Jewry, rallied round him all the elements of religious revolt in that unsettled period and welded them into the most formidable anti-Rabbanite Jewish sect. Like Nadab and Abihu, again, the leading spirits of Jewish schisms are, of course, rebels against all constituted Jewish authority, present or past. But the principal cause responsible for the conduct of the Nadabs and Abihus in all generations is—*intoxication*! The Jew, with his wonderful intellectual avidity, and assimilative power, is the first to be touched by new ideas. Greek philosophy, the culture of Alexandria, the Arabic writers, the Rationalists of modern times, have all alarmingly affected him, and rendered the living waters of Judaism stale and insipid for him. He is the soberest of peoples; and just because he is so sober, the slightest taste of an intoxicant causes him to lose his balance. It is spiritual intermarriage, much more so than the sporadic cases of actual intermarriage, that in all periods of intellectual ferment and transition, decimates his ranks. Many a son of Israel then takes

HIS OWN CENSER,

and puts strange fire thereon, and rushes into the Sanctuary of the Eternal. And, alas! the parable of Nadab and Abihu fulfils itself to the very letter in the ultimate fate of these sects. I need say nothing of those lesser known schisms of early Christian and Gaonic times, whose very names have vanished from the consciousness of Israel; but even in the case of such larger

movements we find that, with two or three exceptions, they have all totally disappeared. Those still remaining, like the Samaritans and the Karaites, have shrivelled up to a handful. And if their outward history proves that

"The greenest leaf divorced from its stem
To speedy withering doth itself condemn,"

spiritual sterility is the tale of their inner history. For none of them, living or dead, seem to have produced anything of lasting worth in the realm of thought, or left anything of eternal value in the world of spiritual endeavour. "The Karaites," says Rabbi Abraham ben David, five centuries ago, "have never advanced the cause of Israel. No great book for the strengthening of the Law, or the spread of wisdom, have they produced; not even a great song, strengthening or consoling. Dumb dogs all, unable to protect the sheepfold of Israel!" A somewhat similar judgment has to be passed on the Radical schism of recent generations. I shall confine myself to my personal observation of this school of Judaism in a country where it does not, as here, possess the charm of either isolation or novelty. In America this attempt

TO TRANSFORM JUDAISM

is over seventy years old, and has been tried, and found wanting, in hundreds of congregations. It also was started by men who rushed into the Sanctuary in a state of intoxication—intoxicated with the verbiage of German Rationalism and mid-nineteenth century cosmopolitanism. It is quite beside the question to protest that they may have been honest in their beliefs. Honesty will not save a man from the consequences of his defiance of the physical or of the spiritual laws of the universe; and honesty will not acquit a leader of men at the judgment-bar of history for lamentably lacking the insight of the statesman or the self-respect of the freeman. Had they possessed these, the founders of the Reformed Jewish Church of America could not have found Hebrew so alien and estranging, or placed such a pathetic reliance on the efficacy of strange fire for kindling the spirit in modern Israel. Individualists all, they laboured, and not altogether in vain, to hasten the return of what to them seemed the Golden Age—no king in Israel, and every man doing that which is right in his own eyes. Each "Rabbi" (for some mysterious reason, men who have definitely broken with Rabbinic teaching and the Rabbinic scheme of Jewish life, insist on assuming this title), each "Rabbi" a law unto himself, at will banishing the Sepher Torah from his synagogue, abolishing Sabbath and Festival, and hailing even the most blasphemous vagaries of that form of

HIGHER ANTI-SEMITISM

called Bible Criticism as final and definitive truth! No wonder that a number of such "Rabbis" have, in the course of one generation, publicly renounced Judaism or gone over to Christianity—an unheard of thing in all the preceding thirty-three centuries of our chequered history. Outwardly, and at a distance, the pomp and brilliance of American Reform Judaism may be dazzling. At a nearer view, its light is seen to be but a phosphorescent sheen, the accompaniment of disintegration and decay. Divine fire warms, cheers, is a Sinaitic bush of everlasting life and light.

Strange fire devours, cremates the soul, even when the body remains intact. The loyal son of the Torah should not be blinded by a passing phenomenon of to-day, nor disheartened by defections from the historic form of the faith :—

" Truth crushed to earth shall rise again ;
The eternal years of God are hers ;
But Error wounded writhes in pain
And dies among his worshippers."

You will now, I am sure, pardon me if I introduce a personal note. I recall with interest to-day that the very first sermon in my life was preached, twenty-four years ago, in the Sephardic Synagogue of Philadelphia; and the saintly guide of that historic congregation, Dr. Sabato Morais, has been the most potent religious influence in my life. I have thus early been led to a high appreciation of the role of the Sephardim in the annals of Judaism. Whereas, other sections of Jewry, living in a semi-barbarous environment, have unfortunately often had religion without culture; or, during the last century and a half, too often culture without religion—for one thousand years and more religion *with* culture has been the characteristic of Jewish Sephardic life. And in our own day none, I am sure, realise the fatal danger of

CULTURE WITHOUT RELIGION,

or of religion without culture, or of the experiment, equally fatal, of introducing strange fire into the Sanctuary of Israel, more than this Sephardic mother-congregation of England, with its fine traditions and its illustrious roll of learned Hahamim. When one takes leave of a living friend, the Rabbis tell us, one's greeting should be **לך שלום**, "Proceed in peace." Similar, also, are Jonathan's farewell words to David at the conclusion of to-day's Haphtorah. Now that my sermon is ended, let them also be my parting greeting. We are parallel communities—"nations" we used to speak of each other in earlier days, "sister congregations" we now say. Each guarding its individuality, let us continue to co-operate in the fullest degree in Jewish education, both higher and elementary, in the fostering of Jewish institutional life, and Jewish social service. **לך שלום**. Proceeding from strength to strength, ours be a progress without the loss of any Jewish values towards an ever greater realisation of our ideals. No Jewry has nobler opportunities, or graver responsibilities, than has the Jewish community of England. It is for us worthily to live up to these unparalleled opportunities and quit ourselves as men of these responsibilities. Let us be strong, and strengthen each other, in the performance of these our holy tasks. And once more, in the words of Jonathan: "Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying: The Lord shall be between me and thee, between my seed and thy seed, for ever." **לך שלום אִיטֵר נִשְׁבַּעְנוּ שְׁנֵינוּ אֶחָנוּ בְּשֵׁם ד' לֵאמֹר ד' יִהְיֶה בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין וְדָעִי וּבֵין זֶרַעְךָ עַד עוֹלָם.**



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